

A Wesleyan Ecology of Christian Formation

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Abstract

The language of “ecology/economy” or oikonomia surfaces directly from Wesley’s own writings. Referring to a plan or system of interconnected elements which, in the case of Wesley, fosters developmental growth toward Christian maturity. This brief paper explores elements of a Wesleyan Ecology of Christian Formation through the lens of educational learning outcomes and learning taxonomies. Wesley’s “method” will be viewed via learning assumptions, educational practices and intended outcomes. An approach to forming a local church ecology will be outlined. A series of questions will be raised regarding missing interconnections that contribute to a lack of intentional Christian formation.

Introduction

- 1 In describing the “methodology” of the Methodists, Wesley used the language of *oikonomia*, referring to a plan or system of interconnected elements which fosters developmental growth toward Christian maturity.¹ Hence my title, a Wesleyan “ecology” of Christian formation.
- 2 What I want to do in this presentation is to connect Wesley’s eco-system with education best practices. In the field of education there is a focus on “educating toward outcomes.” Essentially, what kind of a person would we like to see emerge at the conclusion of a given course, or of a three-year educational program? What knowledge, what skills, what values, what attitudes? On the basis of that profile, or desired outcome, an educational curriculum is developed incorporating elements that will facilitate that intended outcome. This model is increasingly being incorporated in seminary-based, pastoral education.²
- 3 If we consider the Mosaic directive “to teach” so that these commands “are observed,” or practiced... to “impress these commands upon your children and talk about them...,” we note a concern that the commands are more than simple rubrics or measurements of acceptable behaviours, but actually intended as content for a learning curriculum and a learning methodology.³
- 4 If we consider Jesus’ directive to “make disciples... and teach them to obey/observe/practice everything I have commanded you,” we understand the

¹ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1749); see also Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting* (1997) Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 83, where he describes “an interlocking network.”

² <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/educational-standard.pdf>

³ Deut. 6:4-9

proactive formation role that is called for, as well as a particular learning methodology.⁴ The apprentice-learner model that Jesus employed for several years with his own ‘life group’ is understood to be the approach that Jesus assumed his disciples would continue to employ.

- 5 If we consider Paul’s representation of the work he had done in Asia Minor, there is a lot of hearing, learning, teaching and practicing (or habit formation), that leads to transformation – new attitudes of mind.⁵ This sounds like a lot of intentionality regarding the process of growing up in Christ.
- 6 If we consider the tradition of the Christian church regarding Christian formation, we have a consistent metaphor of a developmental journey – of various stages, steps, or mileposts that express certain outcomes.⁶ Wesley spoke of the *via salutis*, the way of salvation, in which conversion was merely an entry level stage of the ongoing journey toward a particular outcome.⁷
- 7 This brief paper explores elements of a Wesleyan Ecology of Christian Formation through the lens of educational learning outcomes and learning taxonomies. Wesley’s “method” will be viewed via learning assumptions, educational practices and intended outcomes. An approach to forming a local church ecology will be outlined. A series of questions will be raised regarding our present practices for Christian formation.

An Overview of Wesleyan Faith Formation

- 8 We might wonder, how does education theory apply to making disciples within a Wesleyan framework? Let’s start with reference to how John Wesley thought about this topic. In his letter to Anglican priest, Methodist sympathizer, and lifelong friend Vincent Perronet, Wesley wrote :

“Some time since, you desired an account of *the whole economy* of the people commonly called Methodists... I sent you this account, that you may know not only their **practice** on every head, but likewise the **reasons** whereon it is grounded, **the occasion of every step** they have taken, and the **advantages** reaped thereby.”⁸

- 9 Wesley clearly identifies an eco-system that makes explicit the inter-connected, inter-dependent and interacting set of relationships, structures and practices that were implicit in the Methodist “method.” There were established practices or methods of formation; there were theoretical and theological reasons for those practices; a

⁴ Matt. 28:19-20

⁵ Eph 4:20-24

⁶ See Robert Mulholland Jr. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (1993) Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

⁷ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Sermon 43.

⁸ Wesley, introduction to *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, (1749); originally a letter, this “tract” was republished in multiple editions during Wesley’s lifetime.

developmental record regarding how the methods emerged, and evaluative measures that identified outcomes.

- 10 It was Sondra Matthaei's work from almost 2 decades ago that brought to my attention the agenda items at the first Methodist conference of 1744: "what to teach?" "how to teach?" "who shall teach?"⁹ I am indebted to her framework for making sense of Wesley's developmental methodology.
- 11 Matthaei suggests that "the **aim** of a Wesleyan ecology of faith formation is to make disciples – to shape Christian identity and Christian vocation so that persons respond to God's prevenient grace and find new meaning for their lives in faithful relationship to God and neighbour. **And** following on that, to develop the church's role in nurturing and supporting human response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, including holding persons accountable for the practice of a holy life."¹⁰
- 12 Further, Matthaei adds, "the **context** for a Wesleyan ecology of faith formation is the community of the church that is called to pattern its life after the community of the Trinity... John Wesley's primary metaphor for the Christian community was the Christian family, signifying a small group of people who knew each other well, who could bear one another's burdens, and who would hold each other accountable for practicing the Christian life."¹¹
- 13 In summary a framework for Wesleyan Christian formation has **goals**, our intended outcomes, a **process** for moving people along developmentally, and a **context** that shapes how this formation work takes place.

Now let's think about how education "best practices" contribute to our understanding of this Wesleyan framework. I'm not going to take the time today to make all the connections between how the theory helps us make sense of Christian formation. I think you will be able to make those connections yourself, but I will follow this section with application to our Wesley conversation.

Education and Transformative Learning

- 14 Educator Juliet Hinrichsen suggests "that it is necessary to have the intended learner's transformation as a focus of design and not merely as a statement of output. Such a learning orientation needs to be made explicit in the curriculum design process at the earliest stage..." (Hinrichsen, 2009, 79-80). In other words, if we are expecting a learner's present orientation and meaning frame to be transformed, we have to design

⁹ Sondra Higgins Matthaei, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2000), Nashville: Abingdon Press, 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 170-171

¹¹ Ibid., 171

our learning content toward that end, rather than just “hoping” that what we offer will lead to transformation.

- 15 In the discipline of education, Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) is a common educational device for crafting learning objectives. Bloom “believed that teachers should design lessons and tasks to help students meet stated objectives” (Kennedy, 2007, 26). Bloom’s taxonomy and the updated version by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) draw our attention to lower- and higher-order thinking skills. This cognitive approach pays attention to content and the student’s ability to engage with that content in an increasingly complex manner. Bloom was concerned that teachers should understand that learning is a process and that teaching methods should seek to help students move up into the higher stages of synthesis and evaluation (Kennedy, 2007, 26) (see *Diagram #1*)

Anderson and Krathwohl’s update of (Bloom’s Taxonomy), 2001, 1956		Fink’s Taxonomy 2003 (domains)	
Creating (Evaluation)	Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning or producing	Learning How to Learn (skill acquisition)	Provides the ability for long-term learning by teaching students to become self-directed learners
Evaluating (Synthesis)	Making judgements based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing	Caring (affective)	Provides motivation and energy for learning by developing new interests, feelings, and values associated with the course material
Analyzing (Analysis)	Breaking materials into parts and then determining how the parts interrelate to each other or to an overall structure or purpose	Human Dimension (affective)	helps assess if students learn more about themselves and others; stresses the human factor and gives human significance to learning
Applying (Application)	Carrying out a procedure through executing or implementing	Integration (cognitive)	connecting different ideas that might appear in different disciplines or across the lifespan
Understanding (Comprehension)	Constructing meaning from different types of functions, be they written	Application (cognitive)	encompasses critical, creative, and practical thinking, as well as additional skill sets that

	or graphic messages, or activities		may be beneficial to students
Remembering (Knowledge)	When memory is used to produce definitions, facts, or lists, or to recite or retrieve information	Foundational Knowledge (cognitive)	Includes all the content, ideas, and information that you want your students to know at the end of the course

Diagram #1 Comparing taxonomies

Writing learning objectives using Bloom’s taxonomy helps to clarify expectations for assessment criteria and methods, and to align the design of teaching methods.

Educator Dee Fink has, more recently provided a model for course design that includes both cognitive and affective elements (Fink, 2003). Fink “encourages instructors to create learning goals based on his *taxonomy of significant learning* rather than relying on a content-driven method of course design” (Fallahi, 2011,1). That is, start with the full-orbed picture of what you want students to really learn, rather than what content you want them to acquire. Fink “switches the emphasis away from content toward the goals and skills the instructor wants his or her students to retain after the course is completed” (Fallahi, 2011,2). These taxa require thinking differently about the development of assessment measures.

In particular, Fink’s taxons, *Human Dimension* (assessing if students learn more about themselves and others), *Caring* (assessing if students have developed energy and motivation in association with course materials), and *Learning How to Learn* (assessing acquisition of life-long learning skills), all seem like aspects that Christian formation should be concerned with.

- 16 Adult learning theorist and practitioner, Jack Mezirow indicates that the goal of education is “to foster learners who are able to act on their own purposes, values and beliefs rather than uncritically acting on those of others” (Hanson, 2010, 76).
- 17 Mezirow defines transformative learning as:
“the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, 7-8).
- 18 In terms of application for our purposes, Mezirow speaks of three broad phases of transformational development. The first is what he calls a “disorienting dilemma,” where the learner is confronted with a new experience, or new content, and an unsettled sensation that this is important and needs to be dealt with. The second phase is typified by new learning and integration within existing frameworks that leads to

changes in the learner’s “meaning perspective” (the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions), or way of knowing (Mezirow, 2000, 16). The third phase involves acting upon and experimenting with this new frame of knowing. (See Diagram #2)

Mezirow’s TLT movements	Specific phases	Requirements	
Disorienting dilemma	New experience, new content Unsettled sensation	Context	
	Self-examination (shame, fear, guilt, anger)	Critical self-reflection	Critical discourse
	Critical assessment of assumptions		
Reformulation	Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared		
	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions		
	Planning a course of action		
Acting upon new meaning system	Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans		
	Provisional trying of new roles		
	Building self-confidence and competence in new roles, relationships		
	Reintegrating into one’s life		

Diagram #2 based on Mezirow (2000, 22).

19 Decision-making or volition, is a key factor in transformative learning. The learner has to make “a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new” (Mezirow, 1991, 161). Now, to me, this sounds a lot like the process of conversion and making disciples. And while this is contemporary education theory and practice, I believe that Wesley’s theory, theology and methodology seems eerily congruent.

So, for me, it begs the question, are we recognizing the continuing validity of Wesley’s ecology of Christian formation?

Wesleyan Formation Clarified

20 So let’s go back to the questions at that 1st Methodist conference.
 What to teach? How to teach?
 (we will leave Who should teach? for another day)

- 21 In examining **What to teach?** the Methodist model was both a cognitive process of didactic learning and a formative process of spiritual nurturing.
- 22 Matthaei frames it this way:
- **Acquiring** *Christian belief and practice*; so that “practice mirrors belief, and belief is shaped by practice.” Coming to a shared understanding of belief involves interpretation of Scripture, knowledge of the historical tradition of the church, and reflection on God’s work in the world through our own lived experience. (Instructional mode)
 - **Clarifying** *Christian belief and practice*; dialogue shapes and confirms our sense of Christian identity and reflects the quality of those with whom we converse. Conferring together in groups and one-on-one requires listening to other perspectives and contributing to collective discernment. (Dialogical mode)
 - **Extending** *Christian belief and practice*; Wesley was convinced that the practice of the means of grace (piety & mercy) and living out the faith in communion with God and neighbor had a powerful transformative impact. (Embodied mode)

- 23 And then, **How to Teach?** Participation in the life of the Methodist community included both critical learning and practical divinity. Every member of a Methodist society received instruction in the faith, and nurture for holy living in an *economy* whose **purpose** was behavioural change, spiritual growth, personal interaction, and community transformation.

The learning was transformative because God’s grace was at work as people participated in works of piety and mercy, and then had opportunity to reflect on their experiences through self-examination in a small group process. They were practicing holy living and reflecting on that practice, accompanied by the work of the Holy Spirit. This approach to learning/transformation aided growth in communion with God and neighbour on the journey toward wholeness (*via Salutis*).

- 24 Wesley quote: “that part of our economy, the private weekly meeting for...”

This is a very telling statement about how Wesley understood the interplay of the different elements of his ecology. And what took the priority, for producing growth toward maturity.

- 25 Wesley understood the transformative power of “**how**” (process, context, method), “made sense” of the “**what.**” Which brings us back to the notion of economy. All these interrelated, inter-dependent relationships, practices, contexts, structures, that **together** contribute to growth and maturity. In other writing, Wesley comments on what happens when one or more elements are missing – you get anemic churches.

An Alternative Formation is Required

- 26 We all have been formed by the social, cultural and religious, or a-religious, contexts in which we have been raised. James K A Smith’s work has recently given an expanded

explanation of how this happens.¹² He speaks of “human beings as embodied actors rather than merely thinking things;” he says we need to “prioritize practices rather than ideas as the site of challenge and resistance.”¹³ He concludes by suggesting that the life of Christian community must provide “an alternative cultural formation.”¹⁴ I believe Wesley had figured this out as well, and understood the need for an eco-system to sustain that “Christian” alternative formation process.

There was a time when our society, more or less, provided a Judeo-Christian context for that formation. That is no longer the case, if it ever was true. We are conducting ministry, presently, in a context where people enter our churches or our spheres of relationships, already formed by a certain set of assumptions, knowledge perceptions, habits and practices. We cannot assume that even self-professing Christians have ever been formed by a process of alternative cultural formation – that is, formed as followers of Jesus who have acquired a new set of assumptions regarding how the world works, who have learned to look at the concrete world through transformed and renewed perceptions, whose habits and life practices have been disrupted by the grace of God, displaced and re-formed with the habits and practices of kingdom people.

And this is our cross-over with the education theorists. They are really just catching up with Wesley’s genius. In our Wesleyan tribe, we have some unique “methods” that I wonder if we are fully appropriating? Why go off after the latest idea or book, or seminar? Wesley’s eco-system for Christian formation should stand at the top of the list.

- 27 Wesley’s ecology included **large group, corporate worship**. Methodists were to participate regularly in the Sunday gathering of their local parish. Corporate worship is a mind, body and spirit experience with God, and the family of God. Scripture, song, reflection, prayer, eucharist, and community all contribute to reshaping one’s understanding of personal and global concerns.

“the private weekly meeting for prayer, examination and particular exhortation” or the Class meeting, or what we might call **a Life Group**, was limited in size to about 12 people. It included both seekers and believers. The only criteria was a desire to seek after God, to go deeper. It was a setting for applying the Sunday teaching and experience to personal lives and everyday issues, of challenging and praying for one another. Learning to be an authentic, caring community requires time spent together (beyond Sunday), in loving, forgiving, and seeing from the others’ perspective. This is the building block that Wesley viewed as essential to the “method”

The Society was the teaching and organizational mechanism that connected the various pieces of the ecology together. This is the setting where Methodist doctrine and

¹² James K A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

practice was taught in an instructional mode. Leadership in the societies also coordinated local efforts in caring for the poor among the Methodists as well as others in need, such as offering benevolence, visiting prisoners, and providing education for children.¹⁵ The society had a role in facilitating “acts of mercy” as a communal outcome. A society was usually 50 or more persons and may correspond with the notion of a “missional community.”

- 28 Let’s think of Christian formation this way – **making disciples** is an intentional process of laying foundations of practice and belief that shapes an alternative way of life, **and** provides a pathway to Christian maturity.

In this light, we might understand “discipleship” to be a comprehensive term for the whole of this ecology – all of these elements are required to help us grow up in Christ. While disciple-making is about initial forming of Christian memory, worldview and practices.

In conclusion I would like to raise several questions:

- 29 Do we know how to shape Christian identity and vocation (belief and practice) in the context of small group community? (make disciples)
- 30 Do we know how to shape small disciple-making groups into larger faith communities of mutual support and resourcing? (form congregations/societies)
- 31 Do we know how to shape our corporate worship so that Christian identity and vocation are formed and energized? Do we realize that corporate worship is only one element of a Wesleyan ecology, and maybe not the most important?
- 32 Do we know how to integrate acts of mercy, or service as formative practice, not just as “random acts of kindness” or “social justice?”
- 33 Do we have the resources/methods to support this kind of comprehensive eco-system?
- 34 A final thought from Wesley on the purpose of Christian community:
“Lastly, so that his followers may the more **effectually provoke one another** to love, holy tempers (*fruit of the Spirit*), and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one — the church, dispersed all over the earth; a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.”
John Wesley, Sermon 92 “On Zeal”

¹⁵ Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997, 83-85.

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